

Letter to Administration from Students & Alumni

Dear Chairperson Lee,
Dear President Patton,
Dear Provost Cason,
Dear Dean Moorti,
Dear Ms. Fitzpatrick,

We hope that this note finds you and your loved ones safe and healthy. We are writing out of deep concern over the state of the humanities at Middlebury College and the absence of BIPOC voices on campus and in our curriculum.

Many of us had the great fortune of being History of Art & Architecture (HARC) majors at Middlebury. Specifically, we benefited from the passion and family-like support of a faculty that worked tirelessly to hone our critical thinking skills and broaden our perspective of history, religion, social studies, politics, and economics through the lens of art and architecture.

Over the course of our collective time as HARC majors on campus, we have noticed the steps the HARC department has taken to increase the presence of BIPOC artists, art historians, and art critics in our readings and course materials. We recognize and appreciate the department's dedication to improving the discipline, especially one that is particularly notorious for perpetuating white, euro-centric ideas and ideals.

And yet, we also recognize the limitations of the department that we love so dearly: the Middlebury College HARC Department lacks any specialization in African and African Diasporic Art. While this gap has proven problematic for years - how can we call ourselves well-educated art historians if we are missing critical art historical education of an entire demographic? - the recent national spotlight on White Supremacy and institutionalized racism reminds us again of the urgent need for African and African Diasporic Art specialists within the Middlebury HARC department.

This request is not new. We are aware that the HARC Department first submitted a proposal to hire a tenure-track African Art specialist in 2018. This is fewer than 12 months after Middlebury announced the Creating Connections Consortium (C3), which has received \$5.5M in funding from the Mellon Foundation to establish the C3 Professorship. As you know, this program offers funding for up to two years of tenure-track positions in the humanities with the explicit focus on diversifying faculty.[1] Denied in 2018, the Department resubmitted the request in 2019. While Middlebury College approved funding for an African Art specialist for the 2020-2021 school year, it was only for a two-year, non tenure-track position. As a result, the Department received fewer than five applications and the extended offer was turned down in favor of a tenure-track position at another school. Now, hiring for the role has been suspended indefinitely as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

We recognize the urgent and unprecedented financial situation in which Middlebury finds itself as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. We understand that movement out of the "red"



will take time. However, the hiring of an African Art specialist cannot wait. There are no classes in the HARC department that address any aspect of the Black experience. This is unacceptable. Creating a more equitable and just learning environment for Middlebury students cannot wait.

Middlebury College can and must explore other creative funding options. One potential option is to apply for a Mellon Grant. As Middlebury has been the recipient of over \$37M in funding from the Mellon Foundation since 1971, this option should be a viable first step. In the last 5 years alone, the Mellon Foundation has granted over \$800M in funding to 401 institutions of higher education to support programs related to the humanities and the arts. [2] Furthermore, as a member of the C3, Middlebury can and must apply for the C3 Faculty Funding program, a program specifically dedicated to increasing representation of underrepresented perspectives and voices among faculty. Should this not be an option, the Mellon Foundation continues to award grants in the same capacity.[3]

Additionally, it is important to explicate the obvious fact that the addition of African and African Diasporic Art specialists to the HARC Department would not only benefit the HARC faculty, students and curriculum, but all faculty, students, and departmental curriculums at Middlebury. First and foremost, we are aware of the external support, from the Black Studies and African Studies departments for the role. Additionally, since many Middlebury students elect to fulfill their college art credit through the Intro HARC class, the inclusion of African and African Diasporic specialists in the new Global Intro HARC would expose many non-BIPOC students to a new set of ideas and ideals that will broaden the perspectives they bring to their other classes and dining hall discussions. Furthermore, the expansion of the HARC faculty and curriculum to include African and/or African Diasporic Art will better prepare students to be more equitable leaders in their chosen careers. For example, medical schools have increased their offerings of art history classes as the visual and critical thinking skills are critical in the medical field. Given the medical world's clear failures to protect the health of Black people, especially of Black women, adding these art history classes would help to expose non-BIPOC future doctors and researchers graduating from Middlebury College to a culture that is not their own, providing them with the context and skills to not make the same errors as their predecessors.

If there was ever a plea for the humanities and for the arts, it is now. In the call for justice, for the eradication of White Supremacy, it is the humanities that enable us to become better citizens, discerning citizens, educated citizens, anti-racist citizens.

Hiring an Africanist for the HARC department, albeit a great step, is just one step and it is long overdue. Comparing our offerings to those at peer institutions in the NESCAC[4] Middlebury is the only History of Art & Architecture program without expertise in both African and African Diasporic Art. It is clear that the College has de-prioritized the arts for too long, and has neglected to listen to its own faculty's requests, and are now playing catch up. The Arts in general has a history of severely neglecting the voices of BIPOC, and we are frustrated and disappointed that Middlebury has continued to contribute to this environment.

Thank you for your consideration. We look forward to hearing from you and to discussing how the institution plans to rectify this urgent matter.

Sincerely yours,



Emily Knapp '15 + Adrian Kerester '15

[1] Program to Diversify Faculty Awarded \$5.5 Million Grant from Mellon Foundation, Middlebury College Newsroom, October 2017

[2] The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Grants Database, filtered for Higher Education & Scholarship in the Humanities from 2010-2020

[3] The Courtauld Institute of Art received a grant of \$750,000 this year from the Mellon Foundation to fund two positions: Africanist and a scholar in African Diaspora in the UK.

[4] We looked specifically at the History of Art & Architecture programs offered at Amherst, Bowdoin, Colby, Connecticut College, Tufts University, and Bates; this does not include Williams as they have a top MA program in History of Art.

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